

Setting Up and Editing an “In-House” Journal

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To many university departments of English and language centres, it seems beneficial or even necessary to develop a journal for their teachers who are interested in gaining a wider audience for their ideas. These “in-house” journals are often either practical or theoretical in emphasis. This stems from the nature of the subject, since the “applied” in Applied Linguistics can be interpreted along a spectrum ranging from the practical to the theoretical. It can mean anything from a description of a specific teaching strategy in the classroom to a discussion of different theories. In-house journals often echo the divide between the more practical and the more theoretical aspects of the subject, and their editorial policies are formulated accordingly.

Benefits of an in-house journal

The benefits of a non-refereed in-house journal are indisputable. Among them are the following:

1. Dispersal of Information.

Within any teaching body, it is to the advantage of all that information about teaching methods, aims, and new directions be disseminated. This is especially important for the less experienced teachers or those teachers new to a particular institution. It can also be beneficial to the more experienced or long-serving members of the staff. Staleness in attitude and teaching method is something that is often an inevitable result of the daily routine; it can happen to all of us! This is where detailed practical articles dealing with specific classroom strategies successfully implemented by various teachers can be extremely beneficial. Such specific strategies, thanks to the advent of word processing, can be adapted fairly easily to different classroom situations. This is

especially true of articles that give examples of teaching materials.

2. A Forum for Ideas. The complement to point one is that teachers have a forum available for their views and their personal innovations in the classroom. This can be a great incentive to young teachers who believe they have something new to contribute. Even when standardised teaching materials are used, differences in teaching approach are often worthy of comment and discussion. An in-house journal encourages debate and can lead to beneficial innovations in the areas of teaching materials and methods.

3. Institutional Development. By means of the forum discussed above, topics or issues of immediate relevance to the particular institution can be openly discussed by those most immediately involved. This is not only important educationally; it is of administrative importance for the institution as a whole. By an institution I mean primarily the hierarchy of administrative posts (e.g., director/supervisor/coordinator or equivalent titles) and the classroom teachers working within this hierarchy. There is nothing worse for teachers than what I shall call the “two extremes of educational administration”:

- a. Policies imposed from above with no consultation or discussion. This may be demoralizing to a professionally minded faculty.
- b. No development in policy, accompanied by tacit discouragement of suggestions encouraging change. This “policy” may lead as surely to demoralization and apathy as when policies are imposed from above.

It is not, of course, suggested here that the forum provided by an in-house journal can, by itself, counteract the results of such policies, since the administrative structure and *modus operandi* need to be flexible and democratic to some degree. However, an in-house journal is one element that can help guard against the development of such situations. It can assist in keeping inter-teacher discussion and classroom innovation alive.

An example of an area where discussion of issues specific to the particular institution can lead to new directions in

teaching methods is one which arose from cross-cultural teaching experiences at Kuwait University. In two consecutive issues of *Al Manakh*, the Kuwait University Language Centre in-house journal that I edited, articles were published about the difficulties of teaching discursive writing skills to Arab students (Anderson 1989, 1990). The identification and definition of the problem (the differences in rhetorical and discursive processes and patterns between English and Arabic) was dealt with in the first of two articles. The second article built upon this, dealing specifically with course materials used in some university classes to develop thinking patterns basic to English rhetoric or modes of discussion and argumentation. An experimental run of new teaching material was described and the results given.

Throughout the two articles, discussion focused on problems experienced in the teaching of writing courses at Kuwait University. Since English writing courses were important at the advanced levels of most faculties, especially Science, Engineering, and Medicine, this had direct relevance for many teachers. Difficulties that most had experienced at one time or another were brought to the forefront and discussed. A theoretical framework that helped to explain the origin and nature of such problems was suggested, and one teacher's methods to solve them were explained to allow other coordinators and teachers to try his approach.

An in-house journal has a distinct advantage over a more widely based journal in that problems specific to the teaching conditions in a particular institution can be aired and discussed with the possibility of fast implementation of new approaches. It must be remembered, however, that the corollary of this is that discussions may be conducted and ideas put forward that may not correspond to overall departmental or university policy. It is important that the editor of the journal be aware of this possibility and that the editorial policy deal with such semi-political limiting factors. This is an issue I will return to later.

Setting up an in-house journal

What are the steps involved in setting

up an in-house journal? What considerations should be taken into account in formulating policy and in selecting articles?

1.

An editorial board should be formed. It is important to ensure a presence on the board of faculty expert in different fields of EFL. The work of the editorial board is as follows:

a. Editorial policy must be formulated. Applied linguistics / English language journals generally state a policy somewhere along a spectrum ranging from the most specific or practical area to the more widely theoretical. International refereed journals may specialise in reading or writing skills. A journal may set out to build a reputation for being concerned mainly with the theoretical aspects of teaching a language. Another may focus on classroom teaching skills and their development. Since a local in-house journal is instituted to serve the varying interests of an institution, it may formulate a general rather than a specific editorial policy. Variety, ranging from the theoretical to practical day-to-day teaching concerns, may be most appropriate.

b. After editorial policy has been formulated, editorial board meetings should be held to provide a forum for future revision of such policies in the light of possible new circumstances.

c. The primary work of the editorial board is to act as a consultative body for the consideration and editing of articles. In brief, these tasks include:

- sharing the work and responsibility involved in order to speed up reviewing time and provide backup for continuing work on the journal;
- establishing frequency of publication, approximate number of pages per issue, and number of issues per volume; and
- establishing standards and a procedure for the acceptance or rejection of articles to ensure consistency.

d. The existence of an editorial board also means that a “cushion” or buffer can be brought into operation, lessening the possibility of personal conflict between editor and aspiring author. This can be an important consideration, especially where an in-house journal is concerned.

2.

A preliminary meeting of the editorial board should be held to discuss the points above. The editor should provide an agenda of these points prior to the meeting.

3.

At this meeting, a statement of editorial policy should be written. A request for articles circular should be composed for distribution to all teaching staff and other possible contributors. A deadline for the submission of articles should be included in the circular.

4.

After the deadline for the submission of articles has passed, the articles are distributed to members of the editorial board for critical comments. Deadlines for this part of the procedure must be given, and, if possible, a schedule for the whole process distributed to the editors (if not done already at the first meeting of the editorial board). An editorial comment sheet can also be distributed to members of the editorial board at this point to standardise comments made. To keep track of where particular articles are in the reviewing process, a check list can be distributed to each editor with the paper to be reviewed. This check list will accompany the paper throughout the process and be filled in stage by stage by the editor and assistant editors.

5.

A second editorial board meeting should be held only after comments on articles have been received. Before this meeting, the “impossible” articles should have been weeded out according to comments received from editors. For instance, those articles that require too much language editing to bring them up to the required standard should be rejected (unless they contain exceptional subject matter or interesting statistical information). It should not be common practice for the editor to rewrite articles in order to make them comprehensible. Rewriting can lead to a situation where the editor is no longer an editor but a “ghost writer” of other peoples’ articles. If, after the weeding-out process, there are still too many articles available for the particular issue of the journal,

decisions must be made at the second editorial board meeting where remaining articles are to be accepted. This can be achieved on the basis of the following:

a. Subject matter is obviously important. The article must be of interest to the particular institution or to the field in general. Which of these two predominates will depend on the nature of the editorial policy decided on earlier.

b. In the case of articles containing surveys or statistical information, the decision to include an article will depend on the value of the statistical information given and the scientific veracity of the conclusions reached.

6.

The authors should be informed as to whether their article has been selected or rejected. Those articles that have been selected can then be returned, with editors’ comments, to the contributors; a deadline should be given for the resubmission of revised articles.

7.

While revision is proceeding, the editor will produce the editorial and the contents page. A cover for the magazine should be designed at this point, if one is needed. This may be important for public relations reasons, especially where an in-house journal is concerned.

8.

The typeset version of the articles is produced when all revised articles have been submitted.

9.

Proofreading takes place.

10.

All pages are numbered correctly, matching the page numbers on the contents page.

11.

The final product is sent to the printer.

Problems and limitations

Now I would like to consider briefly some special conditions under which the editorial process of an in-house journal operates. The editor must take these conditions into account when formulating editorial policy and making decisions on the composition of the journal.

First, it is necessary to compare the

modus operandi of internationally refereed journals in applied linguistics with those of in-house journals. Journals such as *TESOL Quarterly*, *English for Specific Purposes*, *ELT Journal*, or *English Teaching Forum*, which have international reputations, possess editorial boards or advisory panels drawing upon experts from several universities in the same country or from universities in different countries. The reviewing of articles and formulation of editorial policy is therefore not in their case a product of a “hot-house” atmosphere. That is, it is not determined by forces applying within one institution only. Refereeing by a panel of experts from disparate institutions is an integral part of the editorial policy of refereed journals.

The situation is usually different, however, where an in-house journal is concerned. It is a common circumstance that the concerns of those who edit the journal may be very different from those who determine the policy of the institution. It is important here to look at these differing viewpoints to understand the resulting problems and likely effects on the editorial process. Although this conflict of interests can influence a range of issues, I will consider just one problem that may beset an editorial team.

Those who do the day-to-day work of editing a journal are often native speakers of English. They are chosen for certain strengths that they will bring to the journal, such as their language proficiency. A professional product is required in which the standard of English is acceptable internationally.

However, the need to ensure such standards can bring conflicts of interest and misunderstandings. The editor and editorial board will, in all likelihood, see their role in terms of setting and maintaining standards in order to encourage the contribution of good articles. This, necessarily, will mean that they choose articles for publication on the basis of merit only. In turn, this policy will involve an assumption that quite apart from their subject matter, articles conform to a certain level of language proficiency in English. The parameters of what is acceptable for the editing process to begin may

need to be “stretched” in the nonnative speaker environment, but there are limits to this process.

This specific editorial problem has its origin in the conflict of interests between the editor and his editorial board on the one hand and the university administration on the other. Where the editor may see his policy and actions in terms of the upholding of standards, the university administration may see them as displaying prejudice against nonnative speakers/writers. As a result of this conflict of interests the problem may cease to be an academic issue and become a semi-political one.

What is needed, then, is a clear initial attempt to define the duties and responsibilities of the editor and his team in terms of the work they have to do. Once these

definitions have been decided upon, the editorial team and the university administration must abide by them. It should also be accepted that the decisions of the editorial team are final.

Another issue related to a conflict of interests is that the university administration may not be prepared to confer upon the editorial board the amount of independence and freedom of action necessary for a vigorous, intellectually stimulating journal. All kinds of semi-political pressures within the university may be operating. This factor will have an immense effect upon the way the editor and the editorial board will operate, necessitating negotiation and compromise.

The editing and publication of an in-house journal can thus be seen to encompass some of the skills of a diplomat

alongside those of academic editor. An awareness of and willingness to operate within this context is important in bringing to reality a home-grown professional journal supportive of teacher development and institutional excellence.

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